The Eppards Point Weather Prophet

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For thousands of years, farmers have dreamed of having long-term weather forecasts that would help improve their farming operations. In 2024, the best a weather forecaster can predict is three days with reasonable accuracy. In 1904, Fairbury area farmer Benjamin Franklin "Frank" Bradbury thought he could develop accurate weather forecasts for 30 days into the future.

The story of the Frank Bradbury family began with William L. Bradbury's birth in 1776 in New Hampshire. In 1805, William married Sarah "Sally" Lunt in Massachusetts. William was 28, and Sarah was 34 when they married. They had four children. One of their children was Joseph Sanders Bradbury, born in 1811 in New Hampshire.

Joseph S. Bradbury grew up in New Hampshire but decided to move to New York City and learn the printing trade. Joseph went to work at a printer's shop to learn the trade, and one of his classmates was Horace Greeley (1811-1872). Horace Greeley became one of the most famous newspapermen in America.

After learning the printing trade, Joseph S. Bradbury and his older brother, William Lunt Bradbury, published the New York Sun newspaper. In 1838, Joseph married Marcena Lunt in Massachusetts. He was 26, and she was 24 when they married. They were first cousins, and they had 12 children. Studies have shown that married first cousins are somewhat more likely than unrelated parents to have a child with a severe birth defect, mental retardation, or genetic disease. It is now illegal for first cousins to marry in Illinois unless both people are over 50.

Around 1845, an epidemic of smallpox broke out in New York City. William L. Bradbury, Joseph S. Bradbury's older brother, died of smallpox at the age of 40. Joseph was 34 when his brother died. Joseph continued to publish the Sun newspaper by himself for several years.

Joseph S. Bradbury started experiencing a medical problem with his eyes in 1848. His doctor advised him to sell his New York business interests and seek an outdoor life in a milder climate. He followed his doctor's advice and moved to Wheeling, West Virginia, where he became engaged in the lumber business.

Joseph S. Bradbury's medical condition improved in West Virginia. He decided to move to Peoria County and become a farmer. In 1850, the family moved from West Virginia to Peoria County, and Joseph became a farmer. Joseph and Marcena had a son in Peoria County in 1857 named Benjamin Franklin "Frank" Bradbury. He was the eleventh of twelve children born to Joseph and Marcena.

In 1869, the Joseph S. Bradbury family moved from Peoria County to Eppards Point Township, just west of Fairbury. They settled on an 80-acre farm in the northeast corner of Section 36. Frank Bradbury was 12 years old when his family moved to Eppards Point.

Frank Bradbury attended District Number 87 Lakeside Country School. It was named Lakeside because there used to be a small pond just southwest of the school building. The old wooden country school building still stands, but the pond has been drained. In the 1870s, farm boys typically attended country school until they finished the sixth grade. They then quit their schooling and helped their father on the family farm. It was extremely unusual for a boy to finish high school in that era.

Around 1875, Frank completed high school in either Fairbury or Pontiac. Frank then attended Eureka College for at least two years and became qualified to be a school teacher. Frank Bradbury held certificates to teach first and second grade. Frank Bradbury became a school teacher for a few years, likely at the Lakeside Country School.

In 1880, Joseph S. Bradbury, Frank Bradbury's father, died at the age of 68. Eighteen months later, Frank Bradbury's mother also died. With his father's death, Frank Bradbury took over farming the 80-acre family farm and stopped teaching. He later served as a Director for the Lakeside Country School for many years.

Frank Bradbury was an avid reader and had always liked to learn about new topics. In 1880, Frank Benjamin formed the Lakeside Literary Club, which he likely named after the Lakeside country school near his farm.

On October 3, 1884, the Pontiac Sentinel published an article announcing the Lakeside Literary Society would give a dramatic and literary entertainment program at the Lakeside schoolhouse. Admission was 25 cents, and the proceeds would be devoted to the society's expenses. The entertainment program must have been unsuccessful because the Lakeside Literary Society ceased operations in 1884.

Frank was deeply saddened by the group's closure and drew an elaborate illustration of a memorial monument for the Lakeside Literary Society. Frank noted that the society was born in 1880 and died in 1884 of exhaustion and old age. A handwritten journal from the Lakeside Literary Club was recently donated to the Fairbury Echoes Museum. The journal contains the date of 1884.

In October of 1886, the Pontiac Sentinel reported that a jury determined that Jennie L. Bradbury, an older sister of Benjamin Bradbury, was legally insane and a pauper at the age of 36. She was eventually sent to the Illinois Eastern Hospital for the Insane in Kankakee. She died in this institution in 1926 at the age of 76.

When Benjamin was not occupied farming his 80-acre farm, he devoted himself to educating himself. He spent a lot of time studying foreign languages and many of the higher and technical branches of science. Benjamin came up with the idea of using principles of astronomy, geography, and meteorology to prepare an “astro-geographical chart” that he could use to make 30-day forecasts of the weather.

On May 3, 1904, the Pontiac Sentinel newspaper published an article titled “Bradbury’s Weather Forecast." The article noted that Bradbury was a farmer living near Fairbury and had become quite prominent for his weather forecasts. The Sentinel published Bradbury's daily weather forecast for May. For each day of the month, Bradbury predicted whether it would be warm, cool, rainy, cloudy, windy, or have frost. Benjamin was 47 when his first weather prediction was published in the Sentinel.

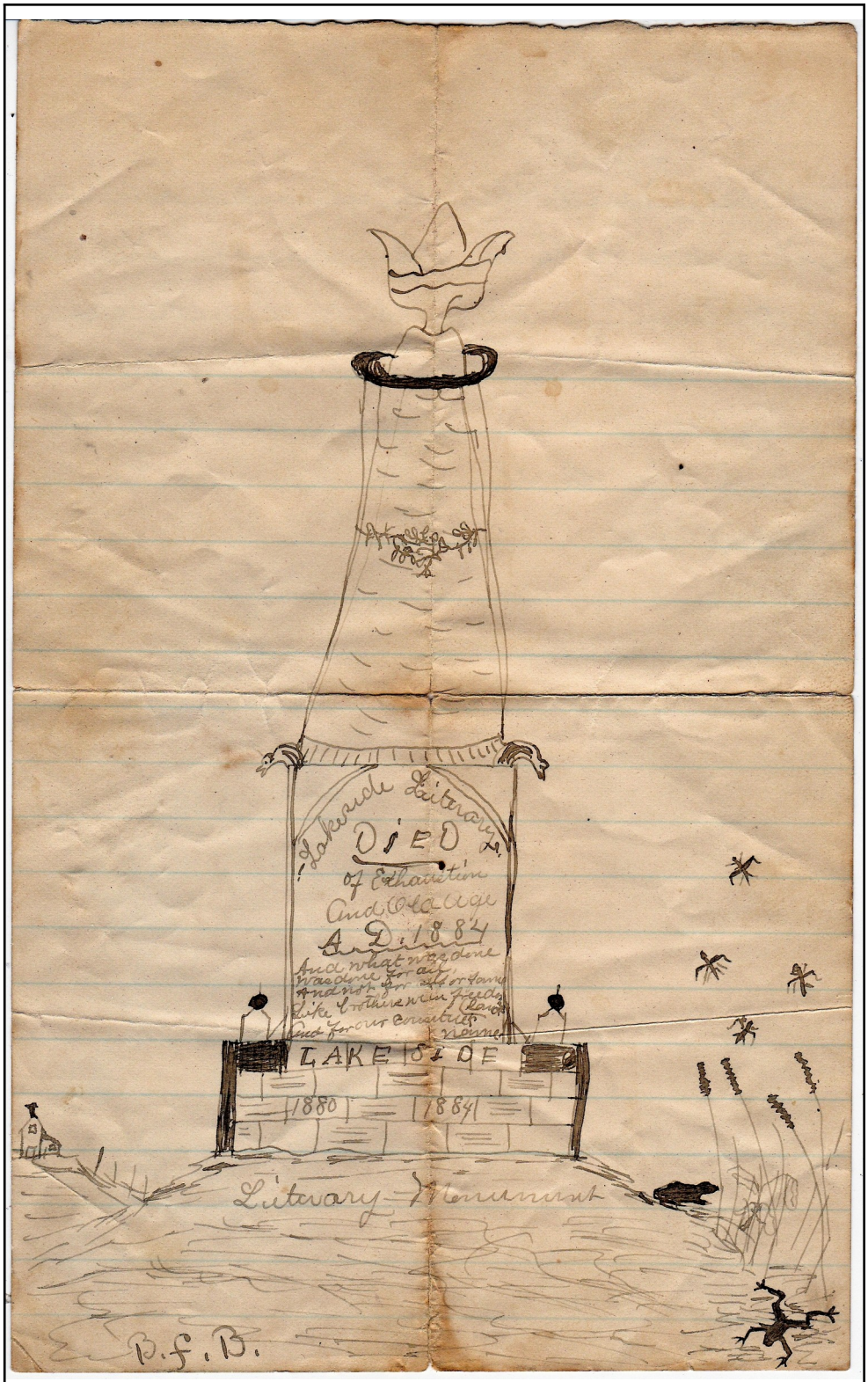
The Sentinel published a second Bradbury weather forecast in August of 1904 for the upcoming month of September. In October of 1905, the Sentinel published a story about Frank Bradbury, the "Eppards Point Weather Prophet," involved in a runaway horse accident on his farm.

Frank Bradbury died on his farm in 1919 at the age of 61. His dead body was discovered by his neighbors when he had not been heard from for several days. Benjamin Franklin Bradbury was buried in Fairbury's Graceland Cemetery. In October of 1920, the Pontiac Daily Leader published an article recounting that the 80-acre farm of B. F. Bradbury, located three and a half miles south of McDowell, had been sold for $360 an acre to G. E. Ulfers. This price would equal $5,585 an acre in today’s dollars.

Only a few physical items document the fascinating life of Frank Bradbury. His old Lakeside country school house still stands. A photograph of Frank Bradbury by Fairbury photographer E. M. Phillips survives, and a photograph of his barn. Frank's hand-drawn elaborate illustration of a memorial monument for the Lakeside Literary Society also survives. The 1884 handwritten journal from the Lakeside Literary Club also survives. These old photographs and the journal were recently donated to the Fairbury Echoes Museum. Frank's 30-day weather forecasts for May and September 1904 are recorded in the Pontiac Daily Leader archive editions.

Frank Bradbury was a highly educated bachelor who enjoyed learning new things. In the early 1900s, he became well-known in Livingston County as the Eppards Point Weather Prophet.

Benjamin Franklin Bradbury (1857-1919)



Sketch of Monument to the Lakeside Literary club done by Benjamin Franklin Bradbury. Likely done in 1884.

Benjamin Franklin Bradbury's barn.